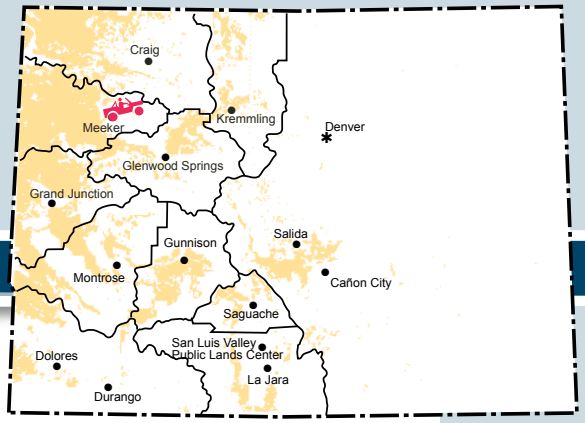
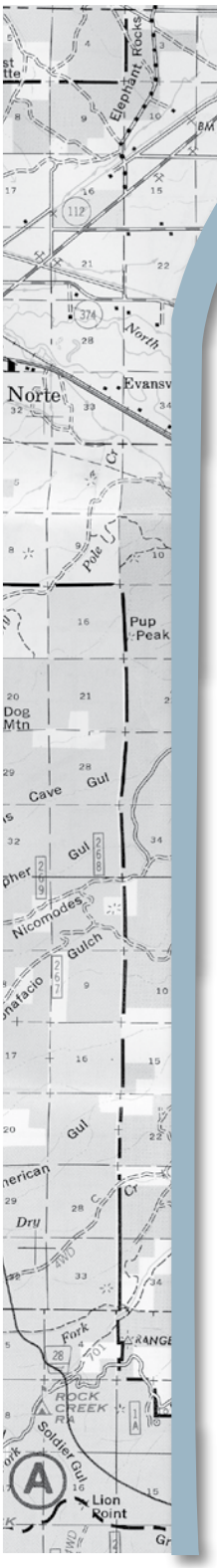
White River Field Office

COLORADO ROAD TRIP

March 2006



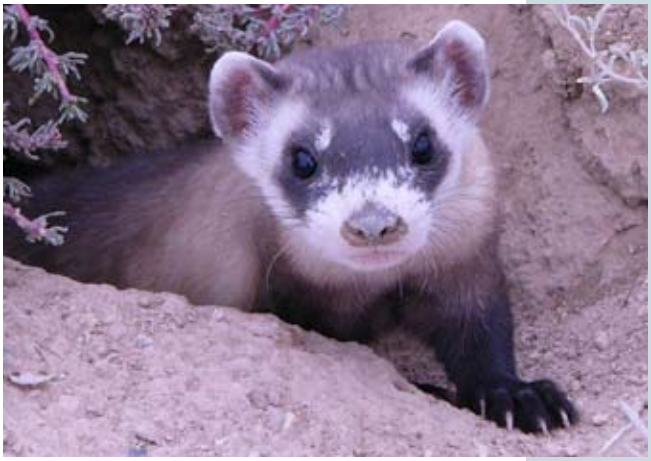


Black-footed Ferret Population Slowly Growing in Colorado

By Jaime Gardner

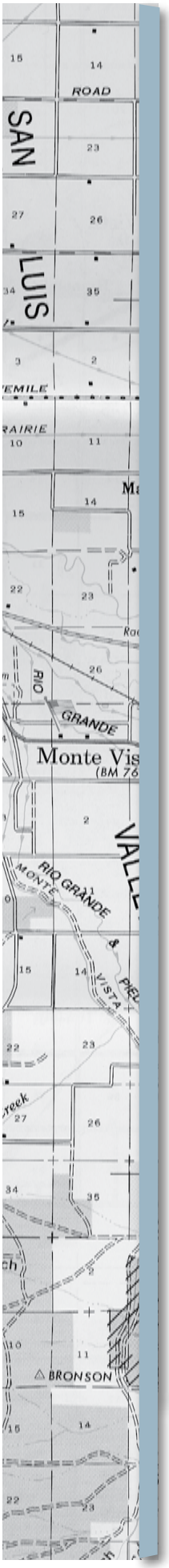
MEEKER, Colo. – In a joint reintroduction program sponsored by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW), the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR), and the US Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS), black-footed ferrets are once again roaming the land between northwestern Colorado and northeastern Utah.

The BLM White River Field Office in Meeker, along with the Little Snake Field Office in Craig, the Vernal Field Office in Vernal, Utah, the Colorado DOW, and the Utah DWR, have made great strides to reintroduce this elusive species. Since the fall of 2001, 189 ferrets have been introduced into the wild in the experimental population area in Colorado between August and November – the traditional time of year for ferrets to separate from the mother.



Most of the ferrets introduced in Colorado are bred in captivity at the National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center, which recently relocated north of Fort Collins, Colorado, from Sybille Canyon near Laramie, Wyoming. However, several wild-born ferrets have been relocated from a reintroduction site in South Dakota, and in 2005, three ferrets born at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo in Colorado Springs were reintroduced in the Meeker area. Prior to reintroduction, the ferrets spend time at preconditioning sites near Browns Park, where they become acclimated to an outdoor habitat similar to their upcoming new home.

This last December, project biologist Brian Holmes counted 13 ferrets in his report of minimum population numbers after 30 days of living in the wild. “This count includes animals introduced in previous years, and is the most that we have had since the start of re-introduction,” says Holmes. In addition, Colorado BLM has a great accomplishment in that there was at least one wild-born ferret last year!



Biologists with the BLM and Colorado DOW must conduct population counts at night, because ferrets are nocturnal creatures, and use spotlights to try to spot the animals peeking out of their burrows. In order to track specific ferrets, each animal bred in captivity has a microchip inserted under their skin, so that the scientists can determine whether animals survive from previous years, and if there have been wild births since the last count.

One of the first species to be listed under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), black-footed ferrets were thought to be extinct in the mid-1970s. As mandated by the Act, a Black-footed Ferret Recovery Plan was completed in 1978, which set goals for the recovery of the species, should a population ever be re-discovered. The last known population of ferrets in the wild, located in and around Mellette County, South Dakota, came to its demise in 1974 due to unknown circumstances.

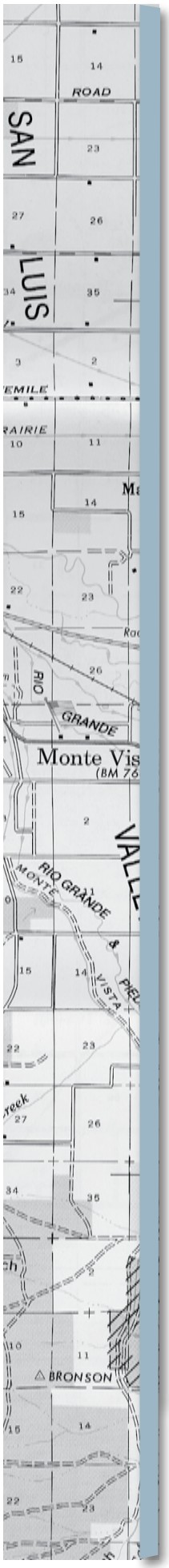
In 1981, a population of 129 ferrets was discovered near Meeteetse, Wyoming. Though considerable effort was made to study and preserve this population, the population declined drastically; it was suspected that sylvatic plague in the prairie dogs population (a primary source of food for ferrets) and development of canine distemper in the ferret population, resulted in only a small number of ferrets remaining in this last known group living in the wild. The 18 remaining ferrets, captured in 1986 and 1987, became the seed population for all subsequent recovery efforts.

Those last 18 ferrets were taken into captivity and housed in and around Laramie, Wyoming. Wyoming Game & Fish Department biologists were the first to successfully breed these animals in captivity at Sybille Canyon, which came under FWS management in 1996 (with a name change to the National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center). Prime breeding age for these ferrets is between 1-4 years old, and the primary objective of the breeding program is to maintain 240 ferrets in that age range in captivity (90 males and 150 females), to maximize the maintenance of genetic diversity as well as produce enough kits to allow for a surplus of 200-220 for reintroduction efforts. The oldest living animal currently in captivity is 9 years old. The average lifespan for black-footed ferrets is 3 years, and females produce litters of 3 kits.

In order to avoid catastrophic population loss in a single breeding facility, the captive population was sub-divided to different locations across the country, starting with the National Zoo in 1988, then Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo in 1988, which no longer has a breeding colony; Cheyenne Mountain Zoo in 1990; Louisville Zoo in 1991; Phoenix Zoo in 1991; and the Toronto Zoo in 1993. A "Black-footed Ferret Genome Research Bank" has been established for use of cryopreserved sperm in artificial insemination.

Under the current Recovery Plan, revised in 1988, all captive-reared ferrets in excess of a minimum 200 animals would be available for reintroduction into the wild. One of the main objectives for reintroduction was to encourage the widest possible distribution of ferret populations throughout the historic range of the species.

Over 5,100 black-footed ferrets have been bred in captivity between 1987-2005. Preparations for the first black-footed ferret reintroduction began in Wyoming in 1989, with the first releases in that State at Shirley Basin in 1991. The Wyoming releases were the culmination of several years of effort and coordination between



State, Federal and local government agencies, and private landowners. The strategy established in Wyoming is a model that has been used for reintroduction and management efforts in Montana and South Dakota (starting in 1994), Arizona (1996), Utah (1999), and in Mexico and Colorado (2001). Biologists estimate that 500-600 ferrets are alive in the wild today throughout the reintroduction area in these states, with over 2200 ferrets released into the wild since 1991.

Attempts to reintroduce endangered species are often met with considerable opposition from local citizens concerned about restrictions on Federal and private lands. Amendments to the Endangered Species Act in 1984 allowed for the designation of specific populations of threatened and endangered species as both "experimental" and "non-essential" to the recovery and continued existence of the species. These designations allow federal agencies more flexibility in managing reintroduced populations of endangered species, giving them the opportunity to create management programs with less restrictive regulations for the species and greater compatibility with the existing human activities in the reintroduction area. Federal agencies must continue to use their authority to conserve listed species, and are required to confer with the FWS if there is a determination that new activities are likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the species. However, the ESA does not compel a Federal agency to stop a project, deny a permit, or cease any activity, even if the non-essential experimental population is affected.

The designation of northwest Colorado and northeast Utah as part of an "Experimental Population Area," or ExPA, for the recovery of black-footed ferrets, and the determination that reintroduced black-footed ferrets in the ExPA constitute a "non-essential experimental population," or NEP, is intended to increase chances for ferret reestablishment by promoting local acceptance and cooperation with ferret recovery efforts.

The non-essential experimental population in Colorado and Utah includes all ferrets located in the ExPA, counting any unmarked offspring. It is expected that all released ferrets and their offspring stay in the area, due to the surrounding habitat and geographic barriers to migration. Recovery team cooperating agencies may capture any ferret that leaves the designated area and either return it to the release site, translocate it to another site, place it in captivity, or leave it where it is. If a ferret leaves an identified Management Area and takes up residence on private property within the population area, the landowner can request its removal.

The Colorado DOW, Utah DWR, and Wyoming Game and Fish Department have endorsed the ferret reintroduction under a NEP designation, which was considered necessary in order to gain the support and cooperation of landowners, Federal, State, and local governmental agencies, and recreational interests within the release site.

Cooperatively developed ferret management plans, including the approved Little Snake Resource Area in Colorado and the Coyote Basin in Utah, have included participation by representatives from mineral development, hunting, off-highway vehicle interests, general recreationists, the ranching community, landowners, and local governments. These plans follow the BLM's multiple-use mandate, recognizing that existing land uses are important to the cultural and economic vitality of local communities, and each plan includes specific measures to ensure the compatibility of the ferret release with existing uses.

The black-footed ferret reintroduction program has had incredible success across North America. In the 25 years since the ferret population at Meeteetse was discovered, biologists have made enormous progress – truly a win in the global fight against species extinction!

For more information, contact: Brian Holmes at the BLM White River Field Office, 970-878-3820
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www.blackfootedferret.org, www.co.blm.gov, www.fws.gov, http://wildlife.state.co.us